

**Sermon for Hinde Street Methodist Church  
Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2015 11am**

**Exodus 20.1-17**

**1 Corinthians 1.18-25**

**John 2.13-22**

Today is the 34<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my confirmation. I was baptised in the Catholic Church, but wasn't confirmed with my class-mates when we were 7, because I asked too many questions and wasn't always satisfied with the answers. When I went to university I was an atheist, but between my first and second year, something happened – but it's another story. And when I returned was open to being invited to the ecumenical group that included the Methodists. At Open Door I met Phillip, the chaplain, who was also the minister of one of the local Churches. I went to both, and continued to ask questions, because the answers still didn't satisfy me. And after a while I asked if I could be confirmed. I was surprised when his answer was "yes, of course!" We met for confirmation classes, and even 'though it was clear I didn't agree with all he thought I should, he didn't ever question my faith in God. Phillip gave me an amazing gift. He welcomed me and accepted me as I was, with all my questions and uncertainty and didn't try to sort me out. He allowed me space to explore, to think and rethink what I believed. I am sure, that without that gift of space, I wouldn't be here now. I'd have left the institutional church long time ago with the many other people who find it stultifying. And the reason I'm telling you this today? It isn't just because it's the anniversary of my confirmation, but because I think one of the things today's readings share, has to do with life-giving space. It's not at all obvious, but at the centre of each, a space that invites us to grow into in new way of relating to God, our neighbours and ourselves. And that offers an alternative way of being to the way of the world.

I'm intrigued to discover that in Judaism, "*you shall have no other gods before me*" is the second commandment, and the first is, "*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...*" It means that these are not abstract laws that can float free from the story in which they originated. They arose out of a particular situation. God brought - redeemed - liberated - the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. And then God gave them the gift of the Ten Commandments, to shape their lives, and their vocation. Until recently, I'd not paid attention to what their lives were like before they were liberated, but a book by the theologian Walter Brueggemann, has helped me to see, that what the Israelites were freed from is not just as a backdrop to the commandments, but the key to the vocation they were given through them. For Brueggemann, Egypt, isn't just a place. It's a metaphor for a social, economic and political system in which there is no space for rest. No rest for the Israelite slaves. No rest for their supervisors. No rest even, for Pharaoh, who had to constantly monitor production. Nor could the Egyptian gods rest, because their insatiable demands drove the whole system. So when God gives the Ten Commandments, the central point, the pivot between their relationship with God and their neighbours is rest. Brueggemann writes. "*God rested on the seventh day. God did not show up and do more. God absented God's self from the office. God did not come in and check on creation in anxiety to be sure it was all working... The world is an anxiety-free one of well-being because the creator is anxiety-free, and publicly exhibits that freedom from anxiety by not checking things out. God is not a workaholic... God does not keep jacking up production schedules... God rests, serene, at peace.*" When God rests, God resists the 'driven-ness', of

Egypt. And God places rest at the centre of the commandments for the people of Israel. Not just for them, but for the resident aliens and animals, amongst them too. God makes rest and space, Sabbath, central to the vocation, of the people God has called into relationship with God and each other.

I wonder if the culture of Egypt, the driven-ness, has ever been as extreme as it is now. We're not slaves. Yet we seem to have accepted it as normal. The other day, a news reporter said British wages aren't increasing, because our productivity is woefully low. In the education system, children, students and teachers are driven to achieve higher and higher grades. In the city, young workers drive themselves hard, and some to suicide, for fear of losing their jobs or failing placements. In job centres there are targets to get people off benefits. In the health service there are targets for waiting times, and in the care sector, carers only have 15 minutes with elderly people. Productivity, targets, and meeting them, has become a god. And its casualties, those who cannot meet these demands, are labelled scroungers, losers, or weak. Space, for rest and sleep and time for real relationships, things central to our vocation, are sacrificed even 'though we know it doesn't make sense. Lack of sleep, constant anxiety and stress, no time for rest or exercise, for play or conversation, plays havoc with our mental and physical health. Scientists tell us that if we don't sleep enough, if we don't rest or play, if we don't "forget" what we've learnt or what's happened to us, what we've gained from the day's activities cannot be integrated. The result is that many people are sleep-walking from one day to the next, without noticing, let alone resisting the system that drives us. Finding space, rest, time to just be, is essential if we're to be the people God created us to be. We cannot keep driving ourselves. And for people of faith, silence has a central part to play in regaining our humanity. For silence allows us just to be, while our brains and bodies, our souls and our spirits catch up with themselves. It has the same function for our spiritual health as sleep has for our physical and mental health.

I have a hunch that in the time between his Damascus-Road conversion, and his return to Jerusalem three years later, space, and silence, was central to Paul's transformation. In his letter to the Galatians, he says, "*I did not confer with any human being... but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards returned to Damascus.*" I think that we can surmise from this that he was alone, or at least unknown, and that this space, the time, and silence, provided what was needed for him to inhabit this new and life-changing vocation. I say this, because I think its insights are embedded in today's reading from his letter to the Corinthians. And particularly in his challenge about the nature of the life of faith, which is rooted in the foolishness and weakness, of a crucified saviour. This makes no sense to those whose lives are ruled by the wisdom of the world. Not only by the driven-ness of Egypt. But by those who demand simple linear thinking, who want clear answers to their questions about what is permitted and what not, who is right and who is wrong, and who's in and who's out. And the implication in Paul's letter is that, as long as the Christians in Corinth are engaged in such arguments, they are living according to the world's wisdom and not God's, Paul invites them to subject all their debates about power and wisdom, to the criterion of the cross. Because, for those followers of Christ, the cross is the benchmark for understanding what reality looks like, and even 'though the life Christ called us to lead looks like foolishness to the world, it is God's wisdom. And the only way to get to this place is, to let go of our certainties, and embrace the uncertainty, the riskiness, and the foolishness of God.

Letting go of all that we grasp happens in the forgetfulness of silence and rest. Silence isn't easy. When we sit in silence, we become aware of just how noisy, just how self-possessed our minds are. And because most of us find it hard to choose silence, it's not surprising that many of us only receive it as a gift an experience of illness, unemployment or death and so on, overturns our unquestioning acceptance of the culture of driven-ness. Then we discover that, brought up short and challenged, when we pay attention to God's longing for us, we find ourselves letting go of our desire for worldly power and status, and have less need of certainties and answers. And as we have less and less to cling onto, we discover that the powerlessness and weakness we previously avoided at all costs, begins to seem wiser than the world's ways. Maggie Ross, an Anglican solitary nun, says that what's happening in this process is that, the flow between the limited, linear world of left-brain or self-consciousness mind, and the dynamic silence of our deep mind or right brain, is being unblocked. And as we become less driven, less anxious, we become more human. Our concern shifts from ourselves to the victims of the world's driven-ness, to those who aren't making it, according to the world's standards. We learn to see them as neighbours, who might teach us about how strength is embodied in weakness. This isn't something we do 'though. It happens in God's grace, when we put ourselves in God's way, and keep on putting ourselves in God's way. It happens silently, unnoticed, as we forget. None of this offers us certainty. But a crucified God offers us no security, no power, no status, and that, in the eyes of the world, is foolishness. And yet followers of Christ trust that it is the way to life for all.

John's version of Jesus driving the money-changers out of the temple is different the other Gospels. It comes at the beginning of Jesus ministry and not at the end. And as Jesus goes into the temple, and looks at what's happening, he reacts differently. Instead of getting exercised about malpractices, instead of calling the temple a "den or robbers" as he does in the other Gospels, he says "*Stop making my Father's house a market-place!*" This is odd, because if the temple was to function properly people needed to be able to buy the necessary sacrifices, and that made the marketplace essential. So it seems that John's Jesus, wasn't just challenging their practices, but calling for the whole system to be dismantled. I don't think the similarity between this and God's challenge to the culture of Egypt is coincidence. Just as God was revealing a central aspect of God's-self, when God liberated the Israelites from Egypt, so is Jesus when he challenges the temple-system. The religious authorities ask for proof that Jesus has the right to do what he just did and say what he just said. They ask for signs. Jesus' response is typically enigmatic, "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*" They interpret Jesus' declaration literally, as anyone stuck in simple, linear thinking will. "*But*", says John, "*he was speaking of the temple of his body.*" God's presence will no longer be confined to the temple. Jesus is the presence of God. God is no longer to be found in a fixed place. God goes where God will. And God will not be tied down by human certainties. So if we are ever sure that God has moved into our church or neighbourhood or nation, and ours alone, we've fallen into the simple, linear thinking that Jesus challenges the religious authorities, to let go of.

It is challenging 'though, and it's been even more challenging, since Jesus' death and resurrection. For God seems absent. A god without a concrete form is hard for humans to get our minds around (But God wouldn't be God if we could). Injustice, suffering, evil, are frequently cited as reasons why God cannot exist. And so are the actions of Christians. For we often live as functional atheists, participating in the culture of Egypt without questioning it; living lives that do not embody the wisdom of the cross; and appearing to care more for

God's presence in our church buildings than in the Christ we meet, in those who among us as resident aliens. But I think the space God leaves us, God's absence we might call it, has the potential to transform us. It is not that God has gone. It's rather than God will not be tied down. Not by religious authorities in Jesus time. Not by us in ours. God will not be co-opted into our driven-ness, our desire for simplicity, our need to for certainty. God does not do what we wish God to do. And God will not sanctify our views of who is in and out. We cannot be the human beings God created us to be until we let go of believing that God will. It is harder, of course, not to be absolutely certain about God. To have to take risks, to be always speaking provisionally, to accept the unknown. And, although God will not be confined to working in ways we expect, I am convinced that silence is an essential part of that putting ourselves in the way of God. For in silence, the glimpses of God's presence and absence we receive in worship, scripture, prayer, human actions and everyday living, are integrated into our bodies, minds and spirits, as those of us willing to embrace God's foolishness, gradually find our lives shaped into the pattern of Christ's.

I am sure that the space for exploring that Phillip allowed me while he was preparing me for confirmation, has been foundational for the faith that it has been possible for me to grow into, over the years. It may have even shaped it. 'Though I should say that there was no certainty I'd become comfortable with silence and with God's absence and that I'm still learning, because I have to, to accept the gift of rest. I am sure that some of you are going to tell me, silence isn't for me, I'm a doer. But that doesn't mean that what I've been saying isn't for you as well. In a moment, we will commission our class leaders, deputy and assistant leaders. Their role is offering pastoral care and leading meetings that enable members to grow in faith. Classes offer a space for discovery, for exploration, even of perspectives some will call heretical. And in the group or individually, leaders and members offer each other a space to listen, and to be listened too, and to be listened into being. This calls for a particular sort of space, a particular sort of group, of people, of love. It requires a mutual giving and receiving, openness to the other, a willingness to accept that my insights are provisional. It invites those of us, who because of our status or age are considered to have greater wisdom, to ask whether the way we use power is consistent with Christ's foolishness. It asks us to let go of the control we often maintain when we offer care to others. It asks us not to try to solve other people's problems, because we can't live with their or our anxiety about the unknown, but if they wish, to accompany them in the unknown instead. In all this, there is nothing to do, there is only faithful being and love. And the faithful being, we are called to is, to allow our lives to be shaped according to Christ's. God will do the rest as we make space for ourselves, and each other, spend time in silence, rest and Sabbath. And we can trust God will, because, these are as central to our vocation as they were to the people of Israel who God liberated from Egypt. Amen.

Sue Keegan von Allmen  
8/3/2015

Maggie Ross "Silence: A Users Guide" (DLT, 2014)  
Walter Brueggemann "sabbath as resistance" (John Knox Press, 2014)